

CHRISTMAS CHEER

"Peace on Earth; Good Will to Men,"

Through all the Centuries Has Thrilled the Hearts of Men and Urged to Nobler Needs and Higher Aims.

For fourteen hundred years the Christian church has made Christmas, or the feast of the Nativity of Jesus, the chiefest and gladdest of all its observances; for twelve hundred years this festival has been universally celebrated on the 25th day of December. From the beginning, Christmas has been dedicated to the children, as Easter by the same law of fitness has fallen to those of maturer years. This law of fitness, which has determined the use of Christmas as a festival for the young, rests on two facts—one psychic, the other historic. In the first place, Christmas is the memorial of the Child. Typical, perennial, prophetic childhood walks in the traditions of the nature and the nativity of Jesus. The perfectness and innocence after which the race had so long struggled were reached in Jesus at a bound. There they are discerned by the whole world, enshrined in his bosom and expressed in his face. Childhood knows its own and can best understand and interpret the speech and the thought of childhood. It saw its own in the Nativity, and found in the Babe and the Day those things which fix and hold its affections forever. Better than

"Hailed Cherubim,
Or sworded Seraphim,"

childhood has read the tokens of its own life in the vision of the Epiphany. The voices of that Epiphany find their echoes in the "Hosannas" of the little children who welcomed the Christ on his entry into Jerusalem, and much more in the Christmas songs of that universal childhood which has welcomed him into its own heart. "Unto us a child is born; unto us a son is given!"

The manner in which history has apprehended and appropriated Christmas has emphasized its dedication to childhood. The European nations, particularly those from which we are directly descended—the Germans, Goths and Kelts—who most distinctively adopt Christmas as a supreme festival, transferred to it the nobler ideas of their mythology and the more human sentiments and pastimes of their home-life. Christmas came to be a sort of epitome of those national traits and beliefs which through the law of selection survived to them from the old heathen life after they had received the gospel from the missionaries of Rome. All that thus remained was of the element and taste of childish simplicity, childish faith and fancy. The infancy of a nation is much the same as the infancy of individual life. The credulity of childhood is the offspring of that instinct which once moved the whole race. Folklore is phylogenetic history projected along the years of spiritual and intellectual growth. The dwarfs, the fairies and the genti of modern nursery rhymes and Christmas tales are the surviving families of the innumerable kindreds of satyrs, orads, gnomes and elves. Latmos and Asgard, as seats of power, are the perpetual rivals of empires and republics. Thus it came about that the Christianized nations of Europe, seeking in their new faith a center in which to fix the memories

of their race infancy, found it in the feast of the Nativity.

The earlier ages united the calendars of the Eastern and Western churches in the observance, and extended the feast from the 25th of December to the 6th of January; not that either was known to be the date of the Savior's birth, for not even the year of that greatest of all events can be fixed; but the season coincided with the winter solstice, the time when nature begins in Levantine countries to awake out of its annual sleep; and this fact comforted well with the larger wonder of the event of "the Life which was the Light of men." During the twelve days and nights between Nativity and Epiphany, the slumbering credulity of the once pagan Kelts and Germans awoke and clothed itself in the better freedom of faith. Then it was, according to the new order of their belief, that benign spirits—it may be their old deities transfigured—walked the earth and wrought wonders on the land and in the seas; then it was that strange transits occurred amongst the stars; and moving lights illumined the forest glades, and the beasts in field and manger bowed down in obeisance and worship. When all these things passed away, or had settled down into the commonplace of yearly memories, one thing was found to have remained—the use of Christmas as a festival of childhood, and a time for the return of the overburdened souls of men and women to sit awhile amid the innocence and mirth of the seasons and places whence they sprang.

The record of Christmas is the most certain light shining out of the early Christian centuries, and everywhere the face on which that light falls is the face of a child; and though it were abraded face, it is still a child's. Vague and dream-like are the stories of King Olaf and the mighty bearded earls of Norway. Equally myth-like are the tales of the Sea Kings of Jutland, Engleland and sea-girt homes of the later Sagas; but wherever the faith of Jesus touched those Northern shores and the story of the Nativity was told, a light gleamed forth through the boreal gloom; and the Yule-log, burning by fird and bight, became a beacon to the memories of nations to be born of nations through the millenniums of Christendom. England, greater Europe and America have lighted their Christmas fires from these Yule-logs, and tell forever the Yule-tide stories told centuries ago by the children of a race in its intellectual infancy.

In Iceland the Christmas feast had a meaning in the earliest times which it scarcely had elsewhere, and in the stories and legends of Iceland have been best preserved the secrets which made the Northern Christmas, and by inheritance from it, the English Christmas, so completely the festival and high-day of the Christian child. The Norwegians who, in the Ninth Century, discovered and peopled the shores of Iceland were pagans; they had never heard the name of Christ; but they loved freedom and hated the tyrannies of their King, Harold Fairhair; and because they would not stay to be subject to him, they sailed away to make their home on the frozen shores of Ultima Thule. They carried with them the belief that their heathen gods in whom they trusted were doomed to destruction. It had been written in the decree of their own birth that Odin, Baldr and the rest must perish. So it happened that when, in the Tenth Century, the missionaries



came to them they had only to proclaim that Baldr was dead, and that the true and deathless Savior and Lord of men was alive in Jesus of Bethlehem. At this announcement the whole nation leaped to the door of the manger in which the young Child lay, and like the Magi, did him homage. But, like their German brethren, they carried a vast store of their child and folk-lore over to the observances of their new faith. The name of "Allfadir," applied to Odin, was transferred to Jehovah; and the "Edda," or Venerable Grandmother, which had preserved the stories of Baldr and his worshippers, was now employed to preserve the tales and legends of Christmas. Who stops to think, or who even knows, that the thousand and one Christmas conceits and nursery fancies about giants and dwarfs; about Rosy Red and Cinderella; about Boots and the Ogres; about princes brave and princesses as white as milk or as red as blood; all ending in Boots marrying a princess and getting a crown; and Cinderella marrying a prince and riding in a carriage; and the dwarfs and giants coming to the aid of Rosy Red and the rest, and killing the Ogres for their treachery—who, I say, remembers that these have come to us from the most distant years, and the most distant North, through the wide-open door of the children's Christmas feast? Those far-off children's stories and Christmas fancies were not mere pantomime, warmly declares Prof. Max. Muller; and there is, according to the same authority, a real life in the things for which they stand, if indeed only such a life as a child can believe in. We all, young and old, believe in their better teaching, that good is always rewarded and evil always judged. This surely is the meaning of these stories in their relation to Christmas, for the angels at the Nativity sang the same truth as a prophecy: "Peace on earth; good will to men." Christmas makes possible the exploits of apocryphal lads and lassies, given that what is alleged of them stands always for what had and lassie may do to make more good and less evil in the world. With this faith in him nobody will doubt the history or genuineness of the lad who slew all the giants in Cornwall and Wales; or of the lassie who "rode on the North wind's back to the castle that lies east o' the sun and west o' the moon."

While yet an emperor claiming the authority of the Caesars

reigned in the South, the Norse children were telling at Christmas how the Beggar taught the haughty Princess to be a good and loving wife; and how Beauty found at last that the Beast whom she had married was the handsomest and bravest gentleman in all the world. And they said, did these Norse children; in the same way, and in all but the very same words, as the English and American children say it to-day: "Here is the Beggar, and there is the Babe, and let the cabin be burnt away;" and at last, "snip, snap, snout this tale's told out!"

In the South of Europe the more diffuser ritual of the Church and the longer national histories of the people made

Christmas less a distinguishing service, and far less a festival of the children, than in the North. An exception is to be made, perhaps, of certain regions of the Loire and certainly of the whole of Provence. In these parts the Christmas festival and its carols had from the earliest times a peculiar flavor of innocence and childish mirth. But this has always been true of everything Provençal. Where men are troubadours and women are as the stars to be worshiped, children must needs have mirth for their nurserymaid.

In the Isle of Man and on the Celtic shores of Cornwall a children's Christmas seems to have flourished from the first preaching of Christianity. Stories of enchantment and adventure have been told at the Manx firesides a thousand Christmas nights, while the Irish seas boomed and broke along the rocky shores. The apple suspended before the gaping fireplace, sputtering out the nectar drunk from Manx sunshine and dew; and the rudy faces of children telling fortunes and singing Christmas melodies in the glow of the peat fires, are memories older than the oldest records laid up in Ru-hen Castle or the Sodor Cathedral.

The history of the children's Christmas in England and in our own country is the history of the best that our freedom and our faith can show. In this at least we have been true to our descent and traditions—we have kept our hearts young by passing them annually through the enchantments of Christmas. The ingenuity and devotion of our Christendom have united to fix and enhance the interest of childhood in this festival. Nor has the labor been in vain. The in-

stincts of childhood are still retrospective; they still make their center at the cradle of the Babe of Bethlehem.

The establishment of Saint Nicholas as the patron of Christmas shows how completely the day has been dedicated to childhood. Long before anybody dreamed of giving him charge of the cheer and gladness of Christmas, Saint Nicholas was the children's friend. He was born in far-away Patara, in that old and weary-hearted Syria, where mirth and jollity have always had but little place. But from his childhood he was reckoned a saint, and became the protector of little children and the defender of youth and maiden. On the day of his birth, so his story goes, he stood up in the bath, and with folded hands mutely thanked God that he saw the light. He has been a bringer of light ever since. The German children, believing this as no other people do, pray on Christmas Eve for "Christmas light."

When Saint Nicholas found a place in the book of the saints, he was adopted by the Russians as a national patron, and was given charge of the children's joyous festival. Thus it happens that it is Saint Nicholas himself who comes on "the night before Christmas" to fill the little one's stockings and load the Christmas tree with presents for young and old. Very far from the lands of snow and winter was his birthplace; but when Northern favor and affection moved him to a home under the Northern stars, Saint Nicholas put off his oriental robes of linen and his eremite countenance, and put on winter robes of fur and a round and jolly face like those of his Muscovite children, and needs he must be Muscovite even to traveling with reindeer and sledge. From Russia his fame spread to the Netherlands, where, as Santa Claus, the Dutch children sang to him their old-time Christmas songs, and came to believe him the very maker of all their Christmas joys.

The Christmas tree, so popular with the young people in this country is not a thing of yesterday. It may be fairly doubted if there is another belonging of the Northern Christmas so old as this same Weihnachtsbaum, with its tapers and its burthen of presents; unless, indeed, it be the presents themselves, the giving of which was, beyond any doubt, suggested by the offerings of the Wise Men made at the cradle of the Babe.

It used to be a custom in England for the poor and the serving people to carry small boxes about on Christmas to receive offerings and testimonials from the generous hearted and from their employers. Many poor children went from house to house singing Christmas caroles and thrusting their tiny boxes in through the half open doors. But a better thing has come to pass in our day. Many rich people now seek the poor to do them service on the glad day of the Savior's birth, remembering how he said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." "Inasmuch as ye did it to one of my little ones, ye did it unto me." Many Christian children find their truest happiness on Christmas day in seeking to make the poor and sick ones happy by dividing their good things with them in the name of Him who was once a little child.—Rev. H. M. DuBosc, in Texas Christian Advocate.

A waitress may not know a club from a spade, but she can easily raise the dance by simply dropping a tray.